

From: Alan McDonnell
Sent: 15 September 2017 09:39:59
To: Scottish Ministers
Subject: FAO Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Beavers

Attachments: Trees for Life letter to Cab Sec, Strathglass Beaver, 14 Sept 17.pdf,
Beavers - Beaully - Trapping Plan Risks and Animal Welfare - 21 August 2017.pdf

Hi,

Please see the attached enquiry about beavers in Strathglass, also sent in hard copy.

Kind regards,
Alan McDonnell
Conservation Projects Manager

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Cabinet Secretary for the Environment,
Climate Change and Land Reform
The Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
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Your ref: 2017/0024319
14 September 2017

Dear Roseanna,

Beaver trapping in Strathglass

Thank you for your reply, dated 26 July, to our letter about the family of beavers found in Strathglass. While we acknowledge the difficult position the Scottish government finds itself in regarding the future of these escaped beavers, we are concerned about the potential animal welfare impacts of capturing and moving beavers at this time of year. Furthermore, we remain convinced that the current approach being adopted by the government is resulting in a missed opportunity for positive dialogue about beavers in the Highlands.

With respect to animal welfare, we wanted to ask whether the information that has recently emerged about the risks involved in trapping these beavers within the very small timeframe available has influenced your thinking about how to proceed. SNH sent us the enclosed response about the animal welfare risks the trapping involves and we gather from SNH that this has been shared with staff from your department.

While we are in no doubt that due care is being taken by SNH and RZSS to minimise these risks, it seems that the issues around splitting the family unit during trapping and the resulting delays in reuniting the beavers in the wild are beyond the gift of either organisation to address. It also seems logical that the risks to the translocated and potentially divided beaver family are higher with a full winter ahead of them than they would be if trapping were left until the new year when spring is closer.

In view of these risks, delaying the trapping until the early months of next year would seem more prudent, especially because it avoids splitting up the family unit at the onset of winter. We consider that trapping next year, before another litter of kits arrives is perfectly possible and that there is nothing to gain by pressing ahead with trapping this autumn.

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In the meantime, we have been discussing the presence of the beaver family with local landowners, farmers, fishermen and residents. These conversations have been constructive and revealed a wide range of attitudes to the beavers, varying from enthusiasm for their presence to wariness about the impacts they might have. No one has been hostile to these discussions and those with concerns have been prepared to engage in constructive conversations about options for beaver management.

While these discussions are currently a long way from reaching a local consensus around whether or not the long-term presence of beavers would be welcome, we believe the fact that they are currently resident is enabling a calm and open debate about the sorts of issues that have been very difficult in Tayside.

In summary, we think that there is an opportunity here to change the tone of the beaver debate in a positive way. We also see real animal welfare risks in pressing ahead with attempts to trap this beaver family at this time of year. Given that trapping the beavers will remain just as viable an option until the early months of next year, we would urge you to respond to the advice about the animal welfare risks of trapping by delaying the trapping operation until a more favourable window of opportunity opens in 2018, noting the opportunity this opens up to allow further constructive dialogue among stakeholders.

Trees for Life is keen to make a constructive contribution to beaver reintroduction being delivered in collaboration with local people and in ways that provide foundations for the long term sustainability of the species in Scotland. If there is anything we can do to help with this, or to further explain our approach, I hope you will not hesitate to raise it with us.

Yours sincerely,



Steve Micklewright
Chief Executive Officer

Unlicensed Beavers in the River Beauy at Erchless/Aigas

Trapping Plan, Risks and Animal Welfare

Timing - The current plan is to begin active trapping in September. There are currently (in mid-August) 5 not-set Bavarian traps in place (no doors are present so there's no chance of animals being accidentally caught). Beaver young of the year will, by September, be fully weaned. Late summer temperatures are expected to be mild enough for trapping and to allow for smaller individuals to be able to comfortably maintain temperatures, either in the trap or whilst in their burrow/lodges as other family members are caught and removed. The length of the active trapping period cannot be realistically predicted but all trapping will be weather and temperature dependent and stopped if temperatures are expected to drop below freezing for prolonged periods.

Monitoring - Camera traps will be in use throughout the whole trapping process; before the commencement of active trapping to provide information on animals present, and after active trapping has ceased. Imaging may not provide a definite group composition, particularly as individuals of similar size will be difficult to distinguish. As individuals are removed, camera trap images should provide necessary information on any individuals remaining.

Operational Timing – The length of time that active trapping will be taking place over is difficult to predict. It is likely a few individuals will be caught relatively quickly, followed by a slowing in trapping success as the number of remaining animals falls. It is possible that active trapping may run into 2018 depending on progress and weather.

Trapping Continuous Review – The trapping plan will be continually revised in light of trap success, the family composition of trapped and remaining animals, and the animals' interest in the traps.

- There is a realistic chance that not every family member is removed.
- There is also a possibility that sub-adults from any previous litters may already exist in the wider catchment, being only loosely associated (if at all) with this family group.
- Continual re-surveying during the trapping period will be done founded on a reasonable assumption that animals may have been leaking unknown from both local collections over a number of years and that dispersers may live relatively unobtrusively within this catchment.

Welfare and mitigation

Beaver kits are of course more vulnerable than adults and as a social species consideration must be given to any singletons resulting from trapping efforts. The main concern with kits left behind would be their ability to retain enough body heat in harsh weather. They will be weaned and quite independently seeking their own food at this stage although there may be questions about their ability to fend off predators by themselves (fox, pine marten, otter and badger have all been seen using the same areas as the beavers).

It should be noted that beavers have been recorded dispersing from their natal territory as yearlings so survival potential for any remaining kits is good.

There are far fewer concerns about the survival of older singletons and welfare of such animals relates more to the welfare of individuals of such a social species.

Any trapping procedure includes an element of risk. Trapping best practice following successful and regularly employed methods used by European experts and used successfully at the Scottish Beaver Trial, Tayside Beaver Study and River Otter

without incidence will be used. Minor trapping injuries, such as chipped teeth and nails have been recorded in a very small number of individuals (trap escape attempts).

Other Trapping Risks

Death in Transit

As a result of stress is uncommon and extremely unlikely. Best practice employed and shortest time transfers from trap to holding facility using appropriate equipment.

Trapping Injuries

The risk of trapping injuries is low. Follow correct use and placement of traps, and best practice trapping measures. No significant trapping injuries recorded in past trapping experience in Scotland, though broken nails and teeth have been recorded in a very small number of cases as the animal tries to dig/bite the trap in escape attempts. Injury rates using Bavarian traps across Europe where they are well used, are incredibly low. References can be provided.

Trapping deaths

The risk of animals being killed during trapping although present is extremely small. Very few if any have been recorded using Bavarian traps. Follow correct use and placement of traps, and best practice trapping measures.

Post Trap Handling and Risk (this risk borne by Scottish Beavers)

Risk of death in captivity is a consideration; this risk depends greatly on length of time in captivity and the facilities. As for any animal there is an element of risk for any procedure involving anaesthesia. The RZSS beaver health team has been involved in over 70+ beaver screening events with only the one fatality, a sub-adult captured during the Tayside Beaver Study.

There is a concern about stress in captivity, and animals have died during rabies quarantine. A risk is presented when wild animals experiencing drastic changes in circumstances. In particular with these beavers this might be the following factors:

- sudden change in diet
- inappropriate water facilities (enough for all individuals, quality, cleaning regimes etc)
- human contact (needs to be hands off, stress levels while cleaning etc)
- the need to monitor family dynamics closely and react to any changing aggression levels.

The length of time between introducing family members back to each other may become a significant issue. Any loss during the holding period will impact family dynamics differently, for example if one of the breeding adults died, what impact would this have on the release of the family unit, a contingency plan required development. If individuals have to be separated how would they be kept and where do they go.

Other Issues

Not all animals trapped - potentially likely. Monitoring to establish what is there currently (including expanding current area of focus) and during and post trapping to see what is remaining. This may be a large area and any sub-adults may only be loosely associated with the lodge that the trapping effort is focussed on currently. It seems likely that there will be more individuals living on the system. Again this can be monitored for during the active trapping period. There are risks (for young and older animals) that so called trap-shy individuals are encountered, especially as family members are removed. During SBT which employed a fairly continually trapping effort, there were individuals observed but were never trapped, or only trapped once every few years. Others we trapped on every single trapping attempt.

Random Singletons

There is a risk of more animals at liberty in the area. A more in-depth survey can be progressed during active trapping. Water borne surveying might be most appropriate and efficient as land based safe access is variable. Additionally worth looking on a connecting water way (Eskadale Burn, Erchless Burn and the lower reaches of the River Farrar).

Reported sighting and signs found around Lovat bridge and lower Beauly. This is separate from the active lodge (2 hydro dams in-between). This structural separation suggests that it is reasonable to consider that beavers have leaked from both collections up there. There are a number of water courses around the collection at South Clunes that are worth a check in case there is more than one singleton. Priority remains the known breeding family.


21 August 2017